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SENSITIVE
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DEPARTMENT FOR R AND AF/PAPD

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TAGS: KPAO KISL SCUL ET
SUBJECT: GROWING WAHABI INFLUENCE IN ETHIOPIA TESTS THE
LIMITS OF TOLERANCE

SUMMARY

¶11. (SBU) Two recent Public Diplomacy programs have demonstrated the growing reach and influence of Wahabi elements in Ethiopian Muslim society. Post's efforts to translate &The Place of Tolerance in Islam8 into local languages have come to naught because no Muslim translator in Ethiopia is willing to do it fearing Wahabi pressure. Likewise, in the Oromiya Region of Ethiopia, Wahabi influence is clearly growing rapidly and the Wahabi leadership in the country is heavily, if not exclusively, Oromo. At the same time, an Ambassador-hosted lunch with Wahabi and moderate Sunni leaders, as well as post's on-going Faith Communities Outreach, shows that there is still common ground between these two groups and between Christians and Muslims as long as post does not try to engage these groups in religious dialogue or attempting to mediate on faith issues. END
SUMMARY.

SHEK HUSSEN SHRINE AND WAHABI ATTACKS
ON ETHIOPIAN MUSLIM CULTURE

¶12. (U) In FY-2007, the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation (AFCP) made a grant in the amount of \$25,600 to the Oromiya Bureau of Culture for preservation works around the Shek Hussein (NOTE: This is the official Ethiopian spelling of &Sheikh Hussein8) Shrine in the Bale Region of Oromiya Region. PAO, along with a Muslim PAS FSN, and a representative of the Oromiya Bureau of Culture, visited the Shrine on a four-day visit to the area to evaluate the work, document the completed works with photographs, and meet with local representatives at the Shrine. The project was completed in a highly exemplary fashion, the work was very well-done, and the officials at the Shrine were very pleased with our support. PAO sat on the ground with a group of over fifty local persons (almost all male) talking about the Shrine, its history, and the USG's support. Everyone clearly knew that we were behind the project, they were very pleased that we saw fit to help them, and more than a hundred people from the area had benefited economically from wages for manual labor during the life of the project.

¶13. (SBU) Officials noted, however, that Wahabis have been trying for years to close that Shrine, saying it was &un-Islamic8 and &impure.8 The Bureau of Culture representative noted that more than thirty smaller, local

shrines (mainly to Sufi saints) in the area had also been destroyed by Wahabis who often replaced the shrines with Saudi-style mosques; e.g., mosques that reflect Wahabi architectural and interior styling. This mainly happened about five years ago. He also noted, however, that the Wahabis are no longer trying to shut down Shek Hussen Shrine, but instead are trying to &purify the rituals⁸ to remove all the Ethiopian cultural traditions from the semi-annual feasts and celebrations held at the Shrine. While this does represent a softening of Wahabi views in some sense, he also made it clear that if they have it their way, only Saudi-Wahabi rituals would be followed in Ethiopia.

¶14. (U) PAO has also faced questions from young Wahabi student activists in Bahir Dar and Gondar (well away from Bale) about why the USG supported the work at the Shek Hussen Shrine. (COMMENT: This has clearly been a propaganda point of Wahabi activists in Ethiopia for some time as this project has been received very favorably by the moderate Muslim community as it shows support for traditional Ethiopian culture while the Wahabis were denigrating Ethiopian culture and traditions. END COMMENT)

¶15. (U) In the town of Robe, where the travelers stayed overnight, the first restaurant visited had a separate section for women and families curtained off in the Wahabi style. Such sections are not commonly found in Ethiopia where the vast majority of Muslim women normally wear only a veil around the head, but not covering the face, and in any color except black. In the area around Robe and the eighty miles or so to the Shek Hussen Shrine, PAO noted many women

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wearing the black, Wahabi-style abaya with veil covering the face with only the eyes showing. Approximately one in twenty women both in the country and in the towns were so attired, even out in areas where there was no one else in sight, women so veiled were often seen walking alone. One village near Robe is even known locally as &little Saudi Arabia⁸ because so many people there have moved to Saudi Arabia through work and marriage.

NO TOLERANCE FOR &TOLERANCE⁸

¶16. (U) In another example of growing Wahabi influence in Ethiopia, the Public Affairs Section has been planning to translate &The Place of Tolerance in Islam⁸ into Amharic and Oromifa for local consumption. However, after approaching several prominent academics and translators who are known to post, the job was turned down by every one. One scholar wrote a letter to the PAO in which he noted how good the book is, how valid its arguments are, and how much it's needed in Ethiopia, but he noted that &new schools of Muslim thought⁸ in Ethiopia &do not agree with these interpretations⁸ and &we no longer think of ourselves as moderates and Wahabis, but only Muslims.⁸ Another one reported in a phone conversation that he would not even translate the book anonymously, because &they will find out who did it⁸ and the Wahabis will exert a lot of pressure (unspecified) on him and his family. Post is still pursuing a means of translating this book, but it now appears it may have to be done outside the country.

MUSLIM LUNCHES AT THE RESIDENCE CONTINUE . . .

¶17. (U) On 10 November, Ambassador Yamamoto hosted one of an ongoing series of luncheons for Islamic clerics and Muslim leaders, attended by thirteen Muslim leaders, including four Wahabis. The four Wahabis are Oromo. Discussion focused on the Mission's approach to &Faith Communities Outreach,⁸ highlighting several outreach efforts that impacted on the Muslim community:

- a) a Public Affairs grant to the Institute of Ethiopian Studies to purchase Ethiopian Orthodox icons and Islamic manuscripts;
- b) the recent reconstruction of schools in Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa by the U.S. Combined joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA);
- c) the AFCP project to preserve the Shek Hussen Shrine;
- d) the September 2008 Iftar and Meskel (an Ethiopian Christian holiday) meals that the Ambassador hosted in Bahir Dar for the Muslim and Christian communities respectively;
- e) possible support in the coming months by PAS to do a grant to the Islamic Affairs Council to do a nationwide survey of Islamic manuscripts.

On this last point, both the Wahabis and the moderate Islamic Council were very eager to work with the Embassy on a project to survey and document Islamic manuscripts. They are both painfully aware of how much Muslim culture is being siphoned out of the country by wealthy collectors (both in the Middle East and Europe), and want to preserve this rich heritage here in Ethiopia. PAO will explore options on this and advise Washington elements as planning proceeds.

¶8. (U) The Grand Mufti of Ethiopia invited the Embassy to visit the country's oldest mosque with him, which PAO readily agreed to do. Also, Sheikh Elias Redman, the acting head of the Islamic Affairs Council, suggested that the Embassy drill a well in the Wollo Region near the Albuco Mosque, as both Muslims and Christians would benefit from this project. It was clear from the lunch conversation that there are many areas in which the USG can build close and fruitful links with these two main segments of the Muslim community in Ethiopia, as long as we focus on cultural initiatives and

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practical infrastructure projects (e.g., wells and schools).

IFTAR EVENTS HIGHLIGHT U.S. ENGAGEMENT

¶9. (U) We hosted a series of meals for the poorest of people in the Islamic community during IFTAR in the last two years. These events provided more positive impact for our Muslim outreach program, attracting Wahabis and Sunnis alike and gaining their curiosity, at first, but ultimately appreciation and support. A common refrain is that the U.S. is &learning8 to understand other religious beliefs, overturning al-Jazeera stereotypes of U.S. intolerance. Certainly our example made a positive impression with the Islamic clerics and was noted in our luncheons for the Wahabi and Sunni clerics.

CONCLUSION

¶10. (SBU) While Wahabi influence continues to grow in Ethiopia, appealing to the strong sense of cultural pride for which Ethiopians of all faiths are known may be one way to counter the influence of these foreign-financed and influenced activists. Many Ethiopians are well aware of the lack of assistance that Arab and Muslim countries provide to Ethiopia and when they see these groups practicing &cultural imperialism8 against their very old and well-respected Muslim traditions, it definitely grates on them. The Oromiya Bureau of Culture representative offered the services of his office to translate and distribute &The Place of Tolerance in Islam8 and also to look at doing &The Great Theft,⁸ both of which were authored by Khalid Abou el-Fadl. PAS will consider that option, as well as others, but it is vital that

more information by Muslim authors countering Wahabi influence be made available to Ethiopian Muslims in both Amharic and Oromifa. Post will also continue on its present strategy of &Faith Communities Outreach8 (as opposed to &Muslim Outreach8) as a means of promoting the American ideals of tolerance, diversity, and mutual respect and understanding between faiths. This approach of working with all faith communities has been very well-received here by both the Muslim and Christian communities and it undercuts the Islamist argument that the U.S. is only doing &Muslim Outreach8 because of 9/11 and because &they think Muslims are terrorists.⁸ (NOTE: This is another line of argument pursued by Wahabi activists in public meetings the PAO has held). Post intends to continue these periodic contacts with Wahabi leaders, but will concentrate most of its Faith Communities Outreach efforts through the Islamic Affairs Council as the voice of moderate Islam in Ethiopia.

YAMAMOTO